on. the riverbank is strewn with giant honey-colored rushes.

"Name inja chist?" I ask Sultan Shah, who owns my horse. "What is the name of this place?"

"Jangal," he replies. The forest. The word evokes something far different from this dry brown landscape.

A frightened hare bursts from a thorny bush and zigzags ahead of us. Abdul Wakil shoots it with his revolver. The gunshot echoes repeatedly, a flat, dismal sound. We will have rabbit pilaf tonight.

At Rorung, at an altitude of 10,500 feet, we halt for the night with a friendly Wakhi family whose house perches over the valley. Far below, the frozen Wakhan winds like a ribbon across dark-gray sands. We enter the stone house through a series of doors and rooms built like a maze to ward off wind and cold. Several anterooms shelter the family's livestock; the large living room, hub of home life, is lighted and aired only by a hole in the ceiling. Four elevated, felt-padded alcoves serve as dining and sleeping quarters.

In the small kitchen, women kneel beside a narrow fireplace. They pat slabs of dough against its baking-hot walls and remove the bread with tongs when it is cooked. Roland and I sleep in one of the alcoves. Parents, children, grandparents, and visitors settle in the others. They sleep naked under their covers.

French Marriage Customs Puzzle Kirghiz

We ride the entire following day on the *dasht*—a tranquil and monotonous plain. We splash through a marshy meadow, and Abdul Wakil brings his horse alongside mine. "Is Roland Michaud a rich man?" he inquires.

"No, Roland Michaud does not own any land," I reply.

"Nor any livestock?"

"No, but he has studied a lot."

"Studying doesn't make money. How was he able to buy you then?"

"In France, the money does not matter so much. It is better to have a good education."

He remains silent for a long time, mulling over this conversation.

Abdul Wakil is wealthy. He owns some 10,000 goats and sheep, 100 yaks, 17 camels, and 12 horses. This gives him much prestige in the Wakhan, where peasants come to kiss his hand eagerly. He bestows a great honor simply by talking with me, a mere woman.

"If there were good roads, I would have several cars," he asserts.

He doesn't realize that Zasie and its contents would cost his 17 camels and more.

Toward night we enter a valley where the muted sounds of a settlement rise with the evening mist. It is Sarhad, the last Wakhi village this side of the Pamirs. We are at a crossroads of three worlds. To the north lies the U.S.S.R.; to the south, Pakistan. We are moving east, toward the Little Pamir (map, page 439), where a cluster of caravan trails—the old Silk Road—leads directly into China.

"Al-hamdu lillah—Praise be to God. All 17 of them are here," Roland informs me, peering down the path ahead. We have caught up with the camel train.

Trade Changes as Politics Change

I share his happiness. A full moon shines like an egg yolk in the lapis lazuli sky, and the valley unfolds like a felt rug beneath mountains painted blue in the January cold.

Beside a few stone dwellings the 17 camels graze amid sweet rushes. Five swarthy Kirghiz cameleers squat around a fire, savoring their bowls of salted tea.

"As-salam aleikum—Peace be upon you." One hand on the heart, Moslem fashion, we greet the camel drivers.

"Aleikum as-salam," each responds.

Here is Anal, who is in charge: small, unobtrusive, precise. Then Schahchik, whose eyes are green. There is pockmarked Suleiman, hunter, cook, jack-of-all-trades. Then Ay Bash, ever smiling, the most Mongol-looking of the Kirghiz. And finally Abdul Wahid, a refugee from Russia, enigmatic and pensive.

These men, like Rahman Qul and Abdul Wakil, descend from Turco-Mongolian nomads of the Russian Pamirs and Chinese Turkistan. After the Bolshevik Revolution many drifted to the Afghan Pamirs with their herds and flocks. In summer milk products make up their basic diet, but in winter when there is little milk, they depend on bread and tea—hence this caravan.

In the past their marketplace was Kashgar, in Sinkiang. But in the 1950's, when political events in China inhibited trade with Kashgar, the Kirghiz began coming westward to stock up on tea, sugar, cloth, and other supplies at Khandud, and to trade for grain with the Wakhis on the way home.

The next morning we witness a scene that gives us the key to the commerce between Kirghiz and Wakhis. Abdul Wakil takes over:

"Eddye Mohammed, is it you? My father tells me you have wheat to sell."

"I am poor and have very little of it," Eddye Mohammed says, hoping to increase the price. "But refresh yourself first. I have so little wheat that this business will soon be settled."

Abdul Wakil is not fooled. He drinks his tea and the dickering begins. Eddye Mohammed quotes a price—too high.

"Intaur nashud—It won't do," says Abdul Wakil. "Rahman Qul has told me you have agreed to one sheep for ten seer of wheat." A seer is almost 16 pounds.

"I, too, am a Moslem," Eddye Mohammed cries out, shocked that his word is being doubted. And he recites the Shahada, the profession of Moslem faith. But with all the caravaneers on Abdul Wakil's side, Eddye Mohammed gives in.

Despite old antagonisms, the Kirghiz and Wakhis depend upon each other. This bartering of tallow, felt, or livestock for wheat remains a practice among them, even though Afghan bank notes are coming into use.

Sacking Wheat Becomes a Noisy Affair

Since sheep do not accompany this caravan, there are none on hand for delivery. They will be sent to Eddye Mohammed later.

A large rug is spread out on the dirt floor so that not a grain of wheat will be lost. The Wakhis bring forth a sample of their harvest. The Kirghiz reject it—it contains too much dust. The next is satisfactory. Abdul Wakil fills a *piala*—the teabowl that serves as a standard measure in both the Pamirs and Wakhan—and begins transferring wheat into a sack held open by two cameleers.

Both sides carefully count the bowlfuls; at 30 the first sack is full. Suleiman sews it shut and fetches another. The counting goes on.

"Si o do," the Wakhis announce with the next bowlful. "Thirty-two."

"Si o yck!—Thirty-one!" the keen-eyed cameleers protest.

"Si o do!" ... *"Si o yck!"* the argument rages, punctuated by cries of *"La ilaha illa llah!* —There is no god but God!" Allah's greatness finally shines forth. He has favored the count of the honest Kirghiz. It takes two hours to fill the 12 sacks.

After we leave Sarhad, we are forced to stay close to the river. The valley quickly narrows to a gorge (pages 436-7). We are riding on the river's frozen surface. Single file, men, horses, and camels tread cautiously. With a velvety step, the camel's large and flat feet do well on this skating rink, but the iron-shod horses often slip.

On a glass-slick trail, a caravaneer sprinkles sand to prevent a slip that could mean tragedy. Three times, when camels fell on perilous slopes, tende.s risked their lives to free the beasts of their awkward loads so they could get on their feet again.



Utterly exhausted after 9 hours on the trail, a 16-year-old sheltered by a windbreak of unloaded cargo warms himself with tea (below). Kirghiz and Europeans alike suffered from the cold and wind. Roland Michaud recorded temperatures reaching −20° F.





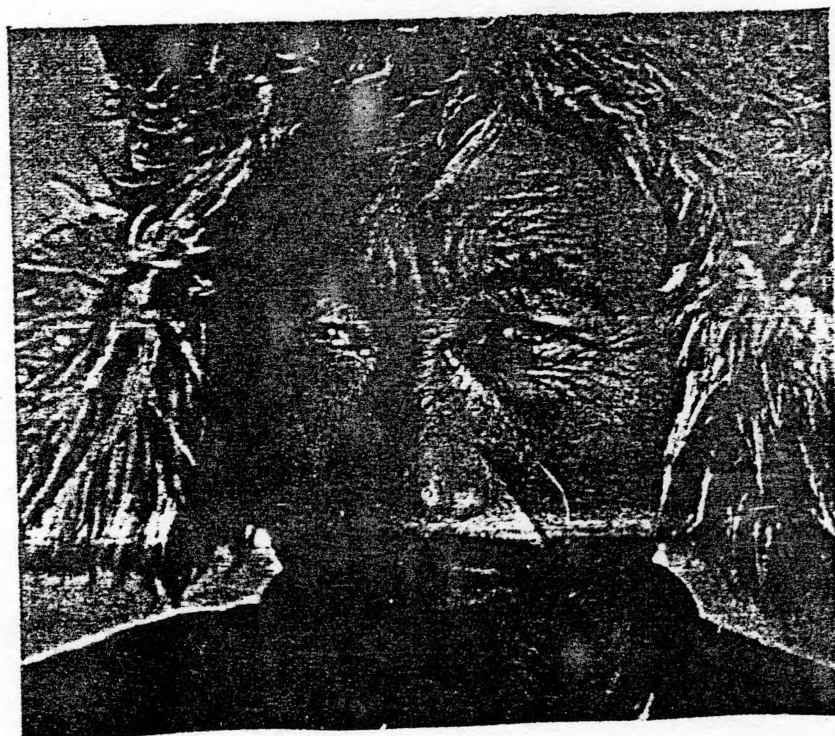


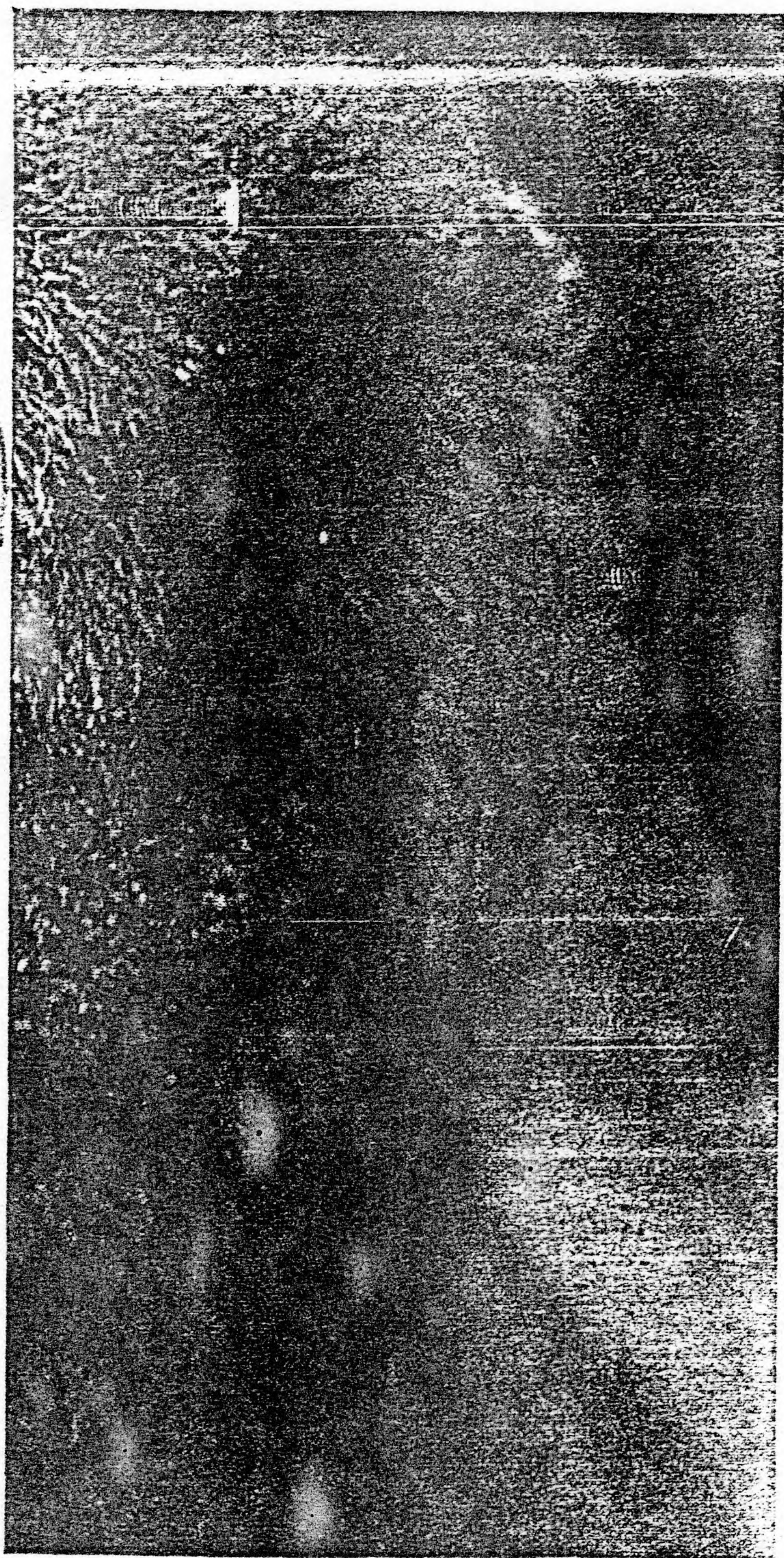
Hitched head to tail and tail to head, camels "cool out" before they are allowed to lie down. The position prevents them from collapsing on the frozen soil and catching cold while still overheated.

Skirting danger, the caravan slowly crosses the frozen Wakhan River (below). Here, where a horse crashed through and drowned the previous year, men cautiously dismount to guide their heavily laden camels. "Often I heard the crust crack," recalls Sabrina. "All I could do was hold my breath and pray."



Where stoics weep: The wind's fierce lash draws tears that immediately freeze on the faces of beast and man alike. But camel and Kirghiz share more than winter's wrath. Feeding and protecting the camel, the owner takes in return the wool and services of a creature able to transport 600 pounds.





"Here, last year, a horse broke through the ice and drowned," Abdul Wakil tells me (pages 446-7). We zigzag across the river time and again. With experienced eyes the Kirghiz pick the safest path.

The gorge closes in with tormented walls, and our own throats tighten. A witch, with a wave of her magic wand, seems to have immobilized the cascades all around us. The ice on the river is more than three feet thick, yet we can still hear the water as it flows swiftly beneath us, and in places the crust cracks ominously.

By early afternoon the gorge has become too narrow, the ice too treacherous; we abandon the river and begin to climb a pass. Ay Bash opens a bag of sand and sprinkles it on a steep trail so icy that even the camels balk (page 445). The cameleers coax them on with tugs and shouts.

"Look out!" Roland suddenly cries, on a narrow ledge over a dizzying precipice. My horse has slipped and fallen on its forelegs. I pull on the reins and the animal struggles to its feet. Fear dampens my brow as we climb onward. We stop every 50 yards to rest the animals, then move again.

Ahead, one of Suleiman's camels slips and collapses on the frozen path; it kneels and tries to crawl. Ay Bash and Schahchik run to its rescue. Risking their own lives, they unload the animal so that it can stand up, then load it again, and move on. Men and animals are suffering, struggling, clinging to the mountainside.

Altitude and Fatigue Take Their Toll

At last the bent figures ahead are silhouetted against the leaden sky. Yard by yard we cross the snowy crest and begin the slow descent. In the distance the river twists and turns like an opalescent dragon. With dusk setting in, the mountains seem enormous, overpowering. We pull our coats tighter, feeling pathetically small.

Fatigue overcomes me, and I stop to rest. Each passing cameleer smiles and says, *"Manda nabashi!*—May you not be tired!" I manage the customary reply, *"Zenda bashi*—May you live long."

The caravan plods onward, becoming a series of black dots against the snow. I finally catch up with it at a primitive stone shelter in which the six Kirghiz will sleep. Roland and I occupy a similar shelter nearby, together with our horse owners.

The Wakhis spend much of the night chatting around a fire. As for us, after heating some tins of food and preparing tea, we drift off into a deep dreamless sleep, despite the fact that our hut is infested with rats and drowned in acrid smoke.

I am happy to leave this gloomy shelter, one of several in the valley. Bundles of firewood lean against the outer walls, intended for occasional visitors. This evidence of mutual help among Pamir travelers comforts me. Fire is vital here. We understand why (before the advent of matches) the caravaneer's *chaqmaq*—his flint and steel (page 452)—was among his most prized possessions.

Once again we ride on the frozen river. Then, in the afternoon, we depart from it for good to begin the climb over new passes, ever higher. I am frightened on the narrow trails beside steep precipices, but my fear becomes secondary in the fight to hold my own and reach the next stage.

Finally we branch off to enter a sheltered basin. There we see our first yurts. A Kirghiz and his family appear from one of the round felt tents. He approaches Roland and Abdul Wakil, and kisses their hands in greeting. His wife and daughter help me from my horse and take me inside to the fire. They remove my coat, scarf, and headdress, and pull off my boots. *"Qawi asti*—You are strong," they tell me, and smile indulgently when, contrary to custom, I immediately stretch out, sighing thankfully.

The thick felt of the yurt is an excellent insulator against the cold (page 452). Inside, against the willow frame in sacks, boxes, and trunks, the Kirghiz family keeps its belongings. Most treasured of all are the meager supplies of tea, sugar, and salt. Tea is so valuable that a Kirghiz carries it on his person, in a *chaikhalta*—a small embroidered tea sack. Sugar is so precious that the tea is usually drunk with salt; salt is so rare that it is used only in tea.

The women stir up the fire, pushing aside some embers to heat the *choqun*—the kettle.

At home on the Afghan range, Kirghiz families of Aq Jelga dwell in circular felt yurts. Huddled in a walled corral, sheep and goats keep warm



Stretched out in the shape of a star, our feet toward the yak-dung fire, we spend a good night with the hospitable Kirghiz family.

All Energies Focus on Battling Cold

Out on the exposed sweep of the plain the next morning, the wind bites more cruelly than ever. My toes grow numb, and I must move them constantly. I rub my nose to keep it from freezing. Roland, too, suffers from the cold. Icicles hang from his beard and mustache, but his hands are especially numb. Not only must he work his cameras; he promised a French scientist that he will make meteorological observations along the way.

We head northwest, leaving the Wakhan behind. It is −4° F., despite the sun and blue sky. Only the camels seem comfortable. Unruffled and aloof, as magnificent as lords, they glide silently onward, occasionally scooping up a lump of snow with their tongues. The cameleers, th ir faces buried in headgear and collars, do not exchange a word. They are saving their strength to fight the cold.

Roland's altimeter tells us we have reached a height of 12,795 feet. We feel a sense of almost literally standing on the Bam-i-Dunya—the Roof of the World.

With my last drop of strength, I reach the Aq Jelga encampment. Collapsing in a yurt, I burst into tears. The mistress of the house takes off my boots and socks and rubs my feet.

with the heat from their own massed bodies. This herd belongs to Kirghiz chief Rahman Qul, who arranged for the authors to join the caravan.





Greeted by a wintry blast, one of the cameleers ventures from a yurt at Mulk Ali. Made of heavy felt lashed to a willow frame, the tent is a snug home, warm in a land where even summers are cool.

Inside the tent (**opposite**), a cheerful blaze warms hands and supper—a "fondue" of dried yogurt cooked with water, fat, and chunks of bread.



Until matches came, stone and steel kindled Kirghiz campfires. Herdsmen produced sparks with this brass-mounted *chaqmaq* by striking the curved steel at the bottom against a piece of flint.



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A CAMELEER PICKS HIS WAY OVER ICY BOULDERS IN AFGHANISTAN'S WAKHAN CORRIDOR

Winter Caravan to the Roof of the World

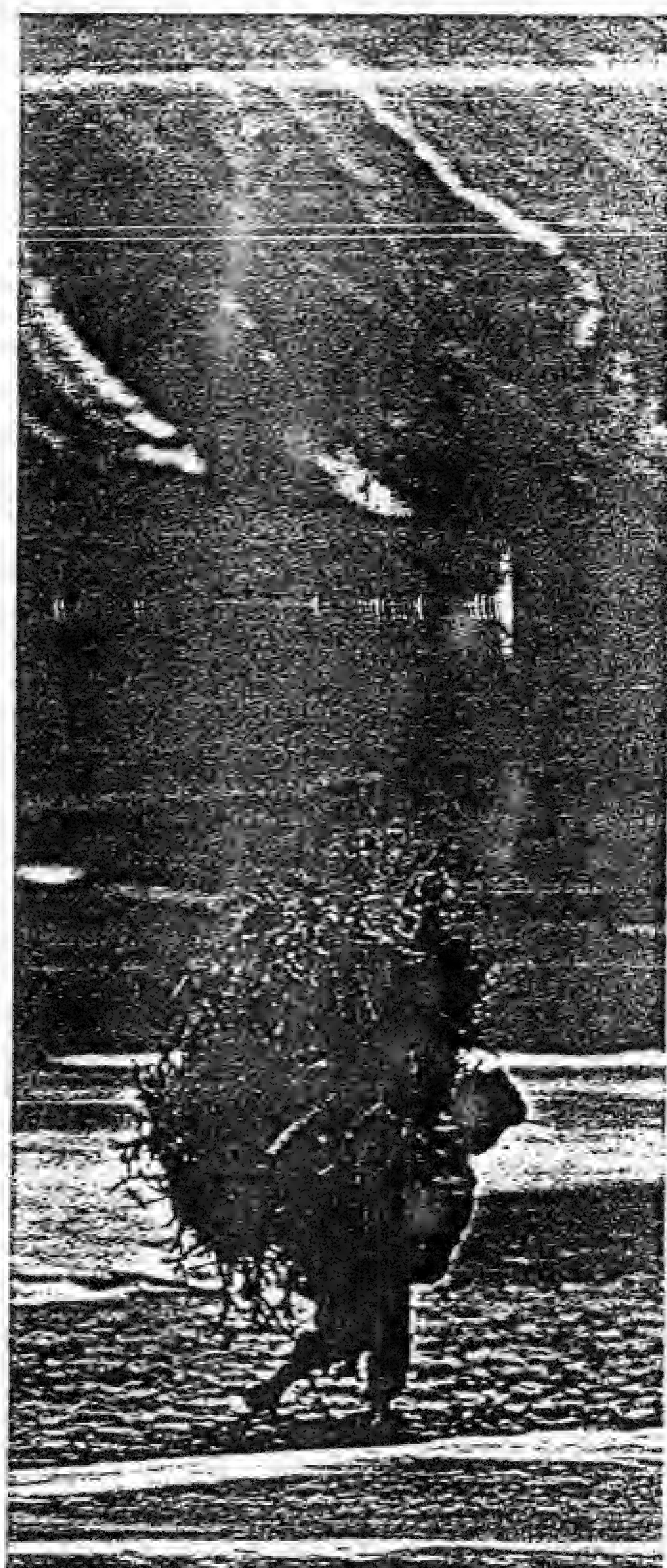
ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY
SABRINA AND ROLAND MICHAUD

ON THE RUSSIAN SIDE of the river they are growing restless. Powerful searchlights sweep across the drifting ice to the Afghanistan side, probing for us. A car moves slowly back and forth along the far bank.

Our own vehicle groans and whines in a sandbank; despite its four-wheel drive, we cannot break it free. The noise upsets Abdul Wakil. He draws and loads his revolver.

The son of a Kirghiz chieftain, our stocky guide would be more comfortable on the back of a horse, more at home on the high treeless plateau of the Little Pamir, the range near the Chinese border far to the east. He is nervous not only about the Russians across the river. Who can say that bandits no longer prowl this bleak, impoverished corner of Afghanistan? It is better, he feels, that we do not call attention to ourselves; he will set out on foot to seek help. Abdul Wakil takes our flashlight and vanishes into the night.

Now we are alone with our stranded car, Roland and I, on watch in the darkness somewhere on the Afghan bank of the Panja River—the Oxus River of the ancient world. The slightest sound startles us, and the inquisitive Russian searchlights keep us on edge. We



Small beneath his burden, a boy trudges toward Mulk Ali with a load of kindling.

Three wives share a roof in the yurt of Abdul Wakil **(opposite)**. Here wife number two, Bibi Turgan, coaxes the flames as she brews tea. Sabrina chats with Bibi (meaning "lady") Orun, first and eldest and therefore the leader among Abdul Wakil's mates. The master of the house entertains the women by plucking a tune on his *dambura*.

She wraps raw wool around my toes, one by one, and advises me to leave them like that, even in my boots. I smile through my tears, and comfort myself with a cup of salted tea.

In the morning the thermometer registers 1° F. Small flakes are falling from the sky, and the encampment's yaks, with morose expressions, huddle in their coats.

Camels Seem to Tread the Clouds

We begin to ride through the bleakness with our 17 camels. Now and then we pass a cluster of yurts. No humans stir, but dogs throw themselves at our horses, yelping. A picture engraves itself on my mind: that of Roland's horse kicking the muzzle of a dog that is nipping at its tail.

A dismal day. Sky and earth merge into one. I can no longer tell whether the camels are undulating on snow or clouds. There is nothing to catch the eye. No tree, no shelter—only the white world of a seemingly infinite plain. Roland is taking the needle blows of the wind on his face. He fumes as he reloads film; a drop of moisture falls from his mustache into the open back of the camera, and instantly freezes on the shutter. The wind is now blowing up a storm, reducing visibility to less than 200 yards. The temperature is −22° F. Icicles hang from the camels' beards.

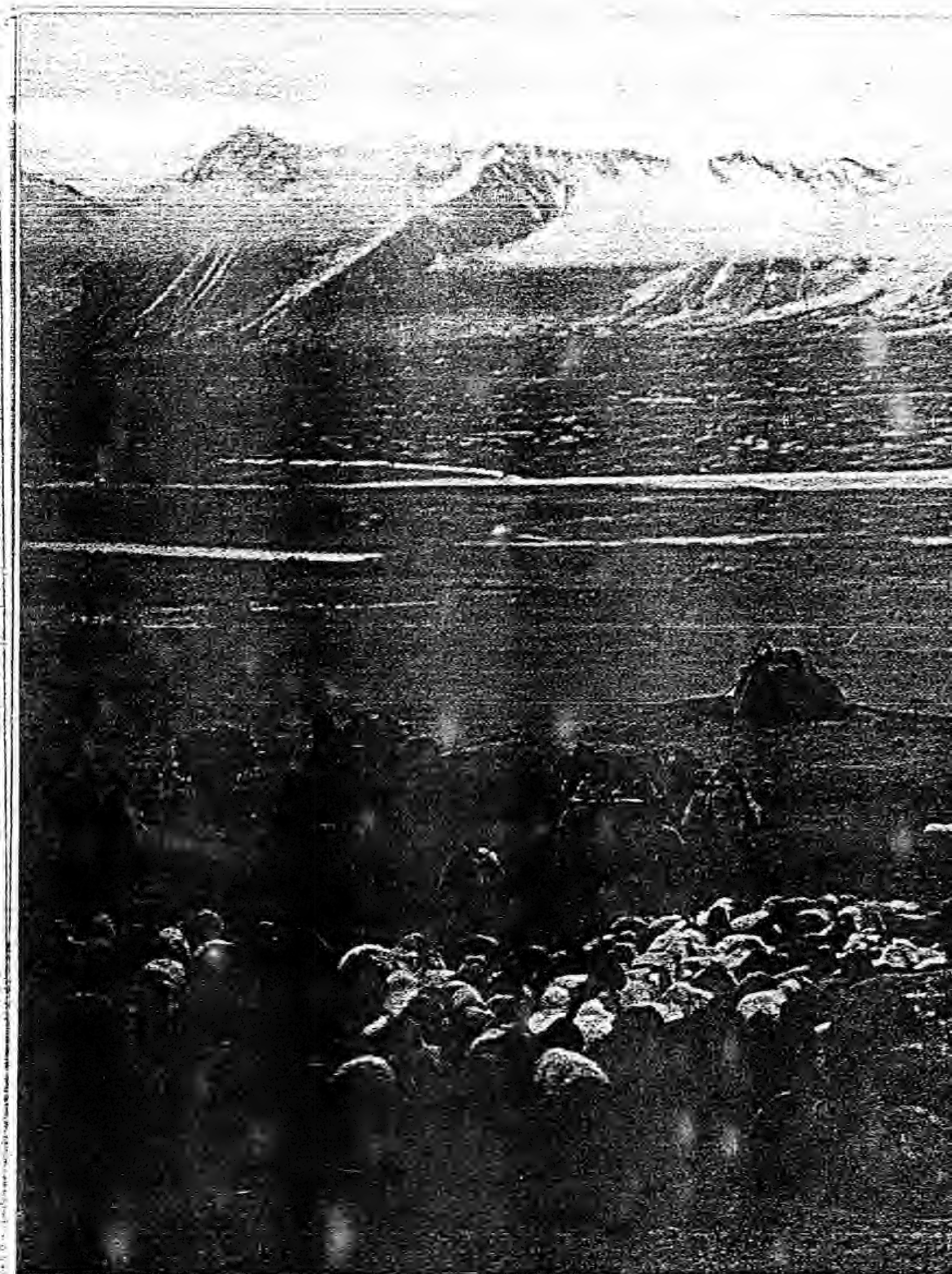
Everyone is exhausted when we stop for the night. Even Ay Bash, his eyebrows white with ice, tells me of his fatigue while he ties the camels together by two's, head to tail and tail to head, to prevent them from collapsing on the frozen ground while still overheated (page 446). After two hours in this upright position, called *chapar*, the beasts are untied and allowed to settle for the night.

These double-humped Bactrians are found in the semidesert regions of China, Mongolia, and Tibet. They are powerful and robust, averaging more than six feet tall at the hump, and their weight can exceed half a ton.

The two enormous humps, as high as 18 inches, are a camel's reserve bank. Together they may hold more than 200 pounds of fat that the animal's body can draw on when other fare is lacking. The beast can survive for weeks without food. But as it uses up its stored provisions, the humps shrink, sometimes almost vanishing.

"The camel is our most valuable animal," Anal tells us. "It is worth 8 yaks or 9 horses or 45 sheep." Not only can it carry a load of 40 seer—more than 600 pounds—but it also yields prized wool for Kirghiz fabrics. It is





Cloud-veiled peaks fence Kirghiz pastures. Sheep, goats, and yaks return to Mulk Ali as chill evening envelops the camp. The authors showed the yurt's owner, Rahman Qul, a photograph



of himself in a copy of the November 1950 GEOGRAPHIC they had brought with them. That issue recounted the Wakhan adventures of another husband-wife team, Jean and Franc Shor.

this thick underfur that protects the Bactrian camel in the extreme cold of the high plateau of central Asia.

"The wool is beautiful and precious to us," Anal says, "so valuable that I must keep a watch over our camels to prevent the Wakhis from coming and pulling out tufts of it."

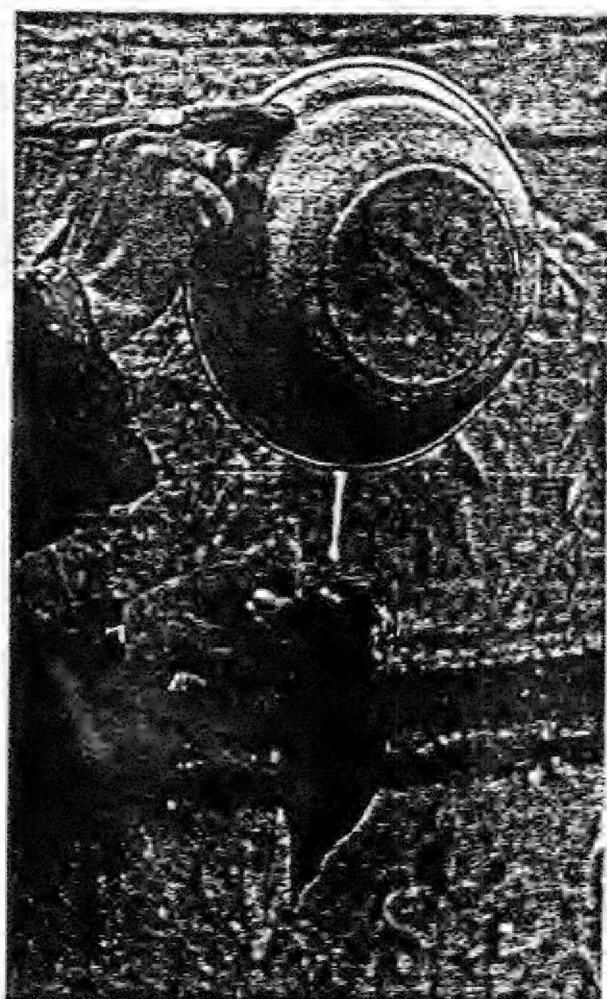
Camp Looms Like an Oasis

Today, *Inshallah*—Allah willing—we shall reach our final destination.

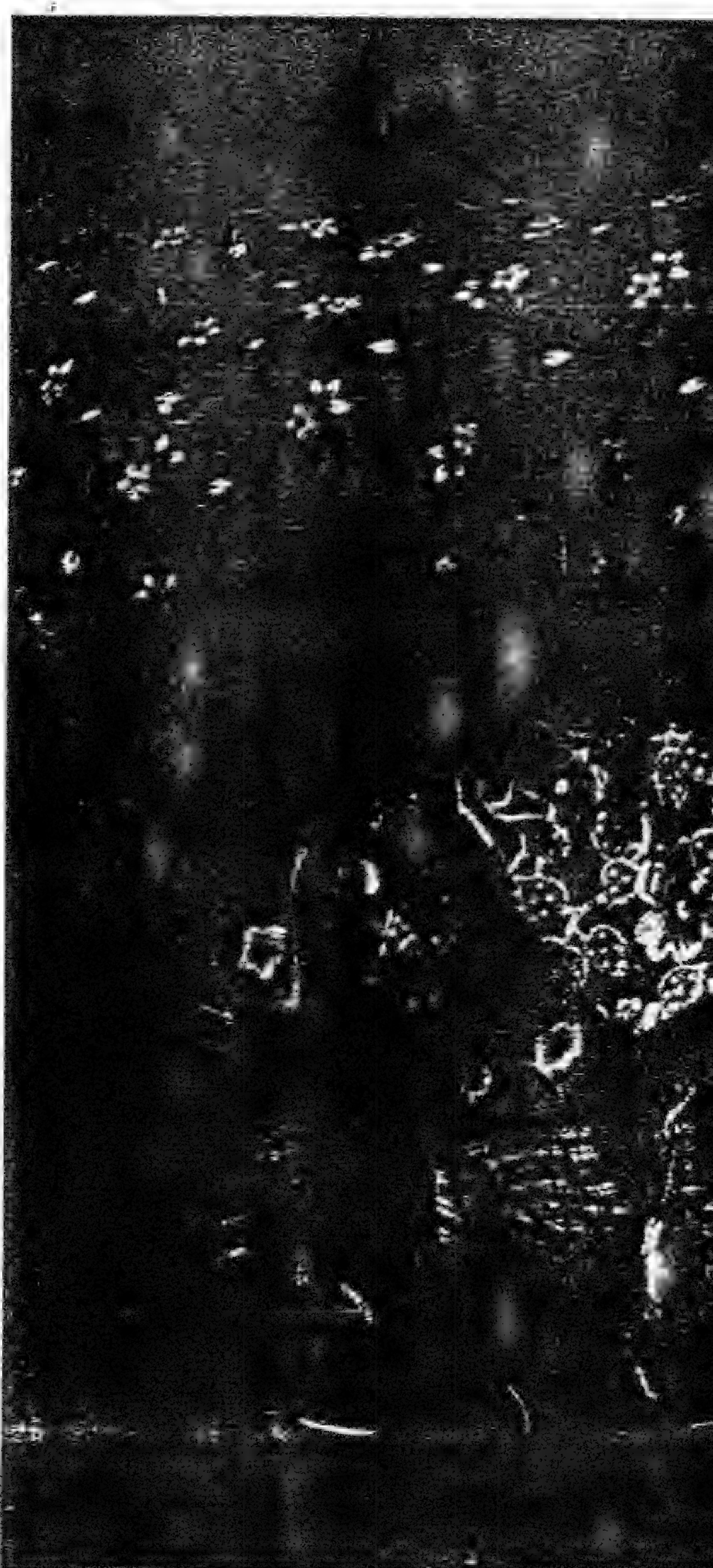
At a pace slower than normal, the caravan gets under way. From time to time a cameleer modestly steps away from the trail for *jawab-i-chai*—literally translated as "the reply of the tea." The weather is cold, but beautiful. We are surprised that at this altitude the ground is almost bare of snow.

We stop to let our horses graze. Anal tells me proudly, "A single blade of Pamir grass is as good as a haystack." Lost in the immense, rippling plateau rimmed by fantastic mountains, we find ourselves at 12,000 feet; the peaks around us soar to 18,000.

Mulk Ali, the winter camp of Rahman Qul, looks like a handful of children's blocks in the distance. But its two stone buildings, its three yurts, its walled enclosure to protect goats and sheep from the cold, constitute an oasis of warmth and sustenance. Some thirty



Baby's homemade bottle, a lambskin sack holds a porridge made from flour and water. The unsweetened mixture barely sustains year-old Zulaikha (right). The mother, unable to nurse her baby, would be reluctant to use yak or goat milk even if cold weather had not reduced the supply; animal milk, she believes, causes illness in infants. "When babies are born in winter," a Kirghiz woman told Sabrina Michaud, "they often die."



people live here in isolation, having only themselves to depend on in their struggle against the hostile winter (pages 456-7).

Perhaps a hundred such camps are spread over the Little Pamir. The nearest neighbor is several hours away by horse. The Kirghiz are very individualistic, but visits are frequently paid; they are the best diversions.

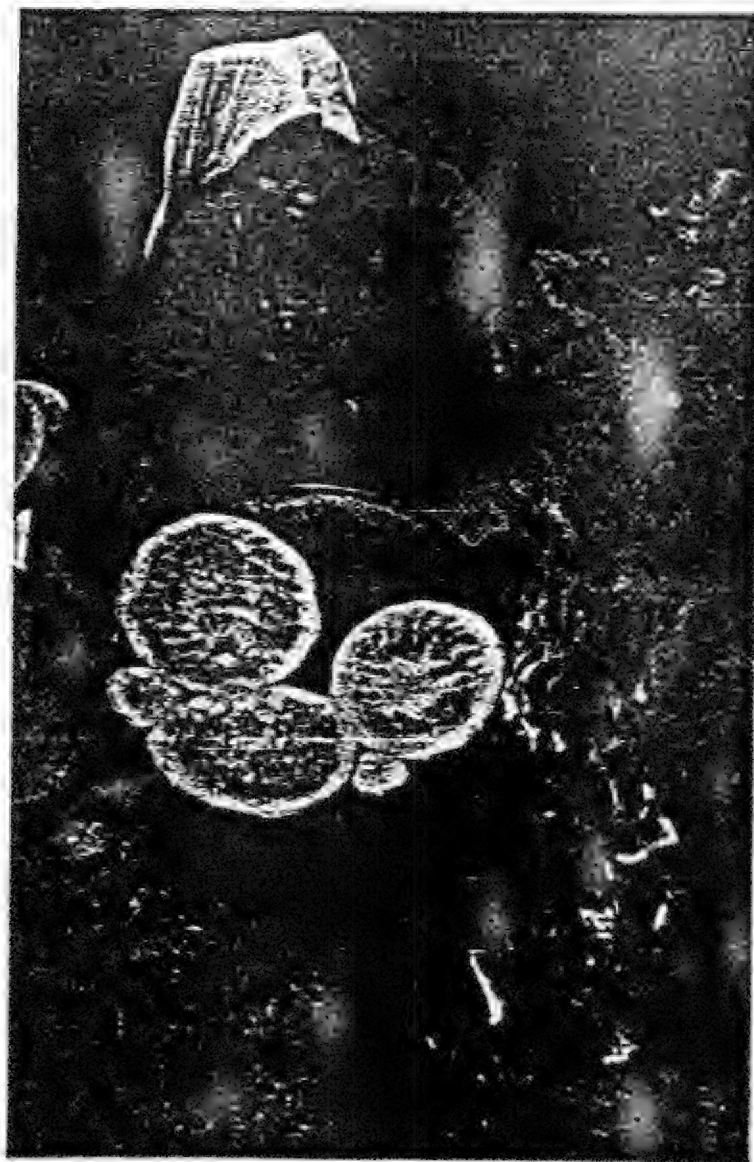
As for the summer camps, they are only yurts and are never situated more than a day's ride from the winter settlements. Their raison d'être is largely economic; moving herds to the higher pastures permits the regrowth of grasses on the lower, winter grazing lands. But one must also understand that these sons and daughters of nomads feel an almost physical need to bow to the rhythm of the seasons. Having summer and winter encampments helps satisfy that urge.

Understand, too, that only wealthy chiefs like Rahman Qul are able to organize a large caravan such as ours. The poorer encampments sometimes buy wheat from Rahman Qul. Visitors to any camp, as well as very poor families, are usually fed and lodged free.

Our arrival creates a great stir at Mulk Ali. There have been practically no men here for a month. Akbar, third son of Rahman Qul, 21 years old, is in charge. Akbar ushers me into the *mihmankhana*—the guest quarters—a



Chores leave little time for leisure



Cooking the day's bread, Bibi Tokhto spends all morning over a hot griddle (left) at Mulk Ali. Often she devotes afternoons to melting ice for water.

Baring her long hair in the privacy of her yurt, Bibi Tokhto enjoys a shampoo. Kirghiz women never go out without head scarfs—red for single girls, white for married. Opening hearts and tents to Sabrina, the women gave her glimpses of camp life seldom seen by outsiders.





Swathed against the cold, a Kirghiz woman milks a shaggy yak. This versatile pack animal of central Asia also yields wool, meat, tough hide, and tail hairs that can serve as a fly whisk.

Visiting friends of Abdul Wakil's family take tea and biscuits during a Moslem festival, a relief from daily routine. The guests traveled 20 miles to pay the call—a treat in the lonely Pamirs.

stone house filled with warm furnishings: a felt carpet, quilted covers, and multicolored pillows. It is heated by a *bukhari*, the traditional Afghan stove, brought here by camel. Akbar immediately offers me tea, then leaves to greet Abdul Wakil and Roland.

I am not alone for long. A woman enters and embraces me. By Kirghiz protocol, it is Abdul Wakil's first and oldest wife, Bibi Orun. She welcomes me warmly, then five other women enter. After exchanging the traditional polite phrases they sit down and watch me silently. Suddenly, a young boy rushes in, announcing the arrival of Abdul Wakil. The women scurry off. Abdul Wakil drinks some tea in the guesthouse before going to his own yurt to see his family again.

The next morning I decide to pay a visit to the women, and, to respect their customs, begin with Bibi Orun. On the way a fierce sheep dog tethered to a yurt leaps up, showing me its sharp teeth. Its ears are cut off, and it wears a spiked collar as protection from the wolves that attack the herds. Bibi Orun sees my fright and scares the dog away with a well-aimed stone.

Abdul Wakil's yurt is calm, clean, and orderly, thanks to the three childless women. But a yurt without children is a great misfortune. If, in another year, his third wife, who is 15 years old, does not bear him a child, he will take a fourth wife.

Abdul Wakil cleans his rifle while Bibi Orun sews a *khalta*—a sack. From time to time she gives an order to Bibi Turgan, who is baking bread, and Zeba Khanim, who is washing clothes. (Khanim, like Bibi, means "lady.") Bibi Orun treats the younger wives like a mother.

I am surprised to see no jealousy among the wives. "Three women and one husband—doesn't this create any arguments?"

Bibi Orun laughs. "When a man is just and good, as well as master of the yurt, there are few problems," she replies. "Besides, it gives each of us less work to do."

Girl Babies Rate No Wet Nurse

As the days pass, I spend much of my time in Rahman Qul's yurt. There are many people and activities there. I am now greeted as "Sabrina jan—dear Sabrina." I grow particularly fond of Bibi Jamal, wife of a son of Rahman Qul (page 463). She spreads a blanket



beside the fire and makes me sit there. Bibi Hawa, a wife of Rahman Qul, prepares a porridge for Zulaikha, a weak one-year-old baby whose frail little body reminds me of a rag doll (pages 458-9).

Bibi Jamal alertly senses my concern and explains that Bibi Hawa is not able to give milk; since her birth, Zulaikha has been fed only porridges.

"Then how did she feed her other child, Mosaddegh? He is handsome and healthy."

"Mosaddegh is a boy and had a nurse."

At three years Mosaddegh, adorable and spoiled, has everyone wrapped around his little finger. He spills the glass containing Zulaikha's meal. Bibi Hawa patiently puts more flour in the glass and pours boiling water over it. No milk. Not even sugar.

"Yak milk sometimes causes diarrhea that can kill children," she says. As for sugar, she does not know whether it would do any good for her baby girl.

I suggest that she replace the water with milk very gradually, and persuade her at least to sweeten the porridge.

Busy Days and Star-filled Nights

Day after day, I note how monotonous are the tasks of the Kirghiz women. The entire morning is spent preparing the bread that is their winter staple. They bake enormous quantities of it, since they must also feed the cameleers, who are without wives here, and occupy the third yurt of the camp. A woman is expensive among the Kirghiz, and I suspect that some cameleers have married poorer Wakhis. In several villages I have noticed them scatter to various homes where the children had a certain Kirghiz look.

Following the noon meal, the women melt down ice for water, or sew, or groom themselves. Then they prepare the evening meal and, after dinner, go right to bed.

Despite our shortness of breath, insomnia, and headaches from the altitude, we become passionately attached to our new lives. We are delighted with the relationship that has grown between us, city dwellers of the West, and them, tent dwellers of the Pamirs. And not for a moment do our hosts display anything but kindness and good humor.

Abdul Wakil shows an interest in photography, and Roland teaches him to use the Polaroid camera. The meteorological observations also interest him. Carrying an anemometer, he accompanies Roland on his four or five daily walks and takes readings as conscientiously as Roland himself. Often, the icy northwest wind blows with gusts of 30 miles or more an hour. No snow falls during our stay, but we record no temperature higher than 25° F. On cold, cloudless nights we never tire of contemplating the Pamir skies studded with twinkling stars.

"Italian" *Ash* Pleases Kirghiz Palates

Our hosts teach us many things. Roland compiles a Persian-Kirghiz glossary of caravan terms, noting that the Kirghiz write with Arabic letters. They also help us put together a small herb collection. For this we follow Mirza, the young shepherd, into the mountains, where we gather a score of plants; he tells us the local name for each.

Our days pass quickly.

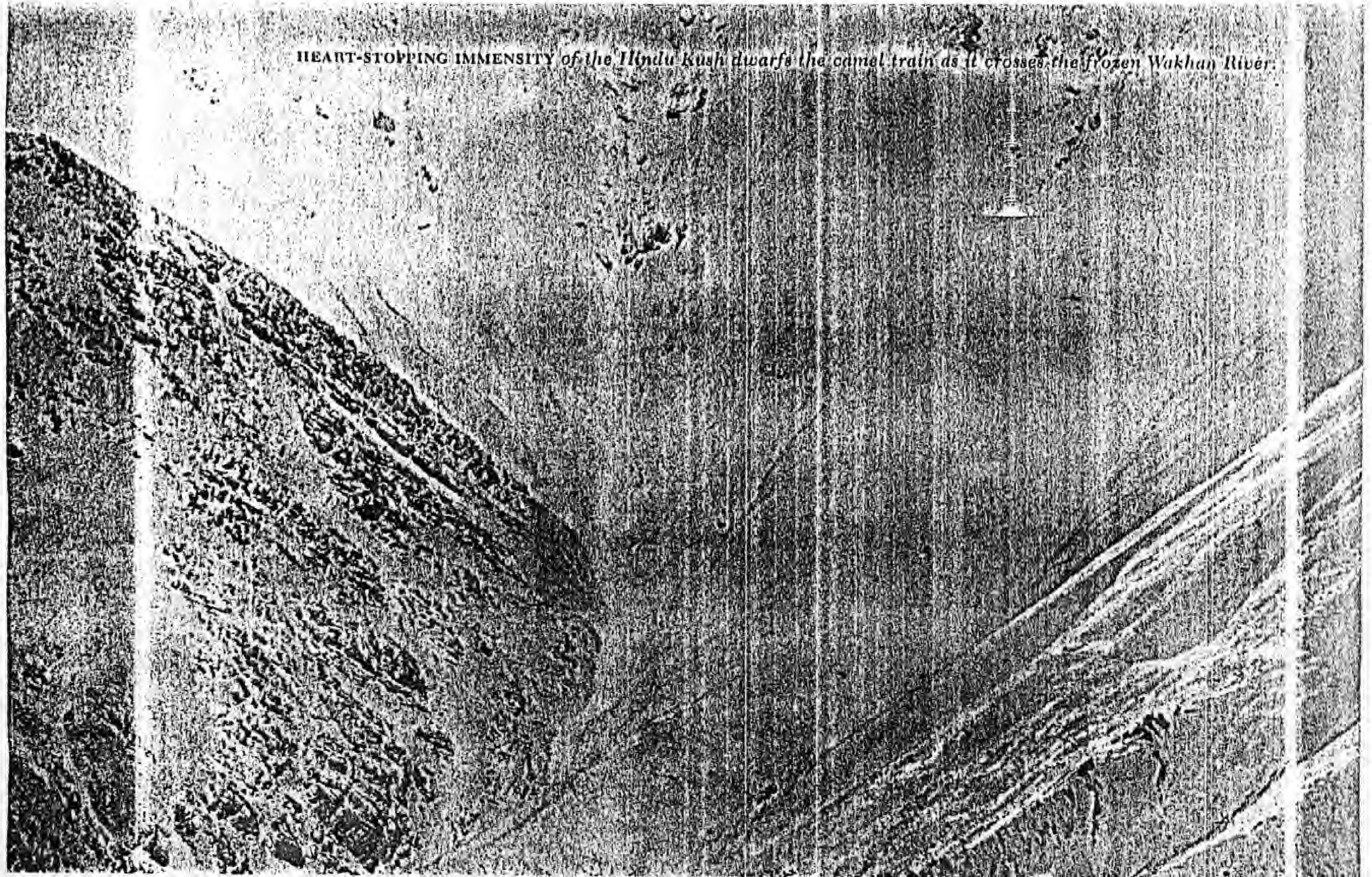
"Sabrina jan," Bibi Jamal asks me one morning, "will you eat with us or in the mihmankhana?"

I tell her I will eat today in the guesthouse. I am tired of the monotonous meals: yak meatballs, soup with mutton as tough as leather, and especially *ash*, which appears at every lunch. This is a sort of noodle cut from bread dough, usually boiled with bits of meat and onion. It is never cooked enough for our taste, and lingers like paste in our mouths.

I decide to introduce our friends to ash, Italian style. I spread out my camp stove and kitchen utensils. All the men watch me with interest, helping me at times to peel onions and garlic—frozen, of course, but still pungent. In half an hour my "spaghetti" with tomato sauce is ready. Abdul Wakil and Akbar eat with us. Unable to feed all the others who look on, we adopt their own custom, sharing the meal with the chiefs and distributing an occasional morsel here and there. The Kirghiz eat with gusto. Abdul

Sorrow shines from a mother's eyes. Bibi Jamal recently lost her 3-month-old daughter, the only child of five years of marriage. Wed to one of chief Rahman Qul's sons, she is his only mate. But a home without children is poor indeed, and her husband may soon take another wife so that he may have a son.





HEART-STOPPING IMMENSITY *of the Hindu Kush dwarfs the camel train as it crosses the frozen Wakhan River.*



Days of hardship still ahead, the Michauds start home with the second winter caravan from Mulk Ali. In spring these high pastures will be green, and the herds will again produce

Wakil asks, "Where can I buy such a meal?"

While on the trail, the caravaneers eat only twice a day—morning and evening—in order not to interrupt the slow walk of the camels. At the winter camp, the Kirghiz are forever busy preparing their favorite dish, *qurut*.

Qurut is a hard, dried yogurt slowly mixed with water into a paste. Heated, with bits of bread and fat added, it resembles a fondue (page 453). In this season qurut is the only dish having a milk base, since the animals produce very little milk in winter. Thus we feel deeply honored when our hosts offer us a full bowl of milk every day.

The task of milking the yaks falls to the woman. This "piece of prehistory," as Roland calls the yak, always seems to be in a bad mood. But its step is sure, it does not fear the mountain torrents, and with great endurance it can carry 150 pounds—a fourth the load of a camel—across 15,000-foot passes. Its dry dung provides the most common fuel—and one of the best—on the high plateaus of central Asia. Its hair can be braided into strong rope, and its hide furnishes tough leather.

Warm Gifts Help Fight the Chill

In two days the second and last caravan of the winter will take to the road toward Khandud. We will return with it.

What excitement in the camp! The men shoe the horses, test the ropes, check the



enough milk to supply the Kirghiz. But when snow and cold return, the men will gird once more for their grueling treks, a test of will and strength worthy of the sons of Genghis Khan.

trappings and felt padding of the camels. The women mend food sacks for the journey.

Each one silently thinks about the trials ahead. The women prepare bread in great quantity for the trip. It will sustain the caravaneers for more than a month.

Attentive host that he is, Abdul Wakil has noticed the shortcomings of our cold-weather clothing. He instructs Bibi Orun to make each of us a *tomaq*, the Kirghiz fur headgear, and *paypaq*—thick felt stockings. Then he collects all the spare boots in the camp. I find myself equipped with a pair belonging to Akbar; Roland receives a beautiful pair made by Kazaks in Sinkiang.

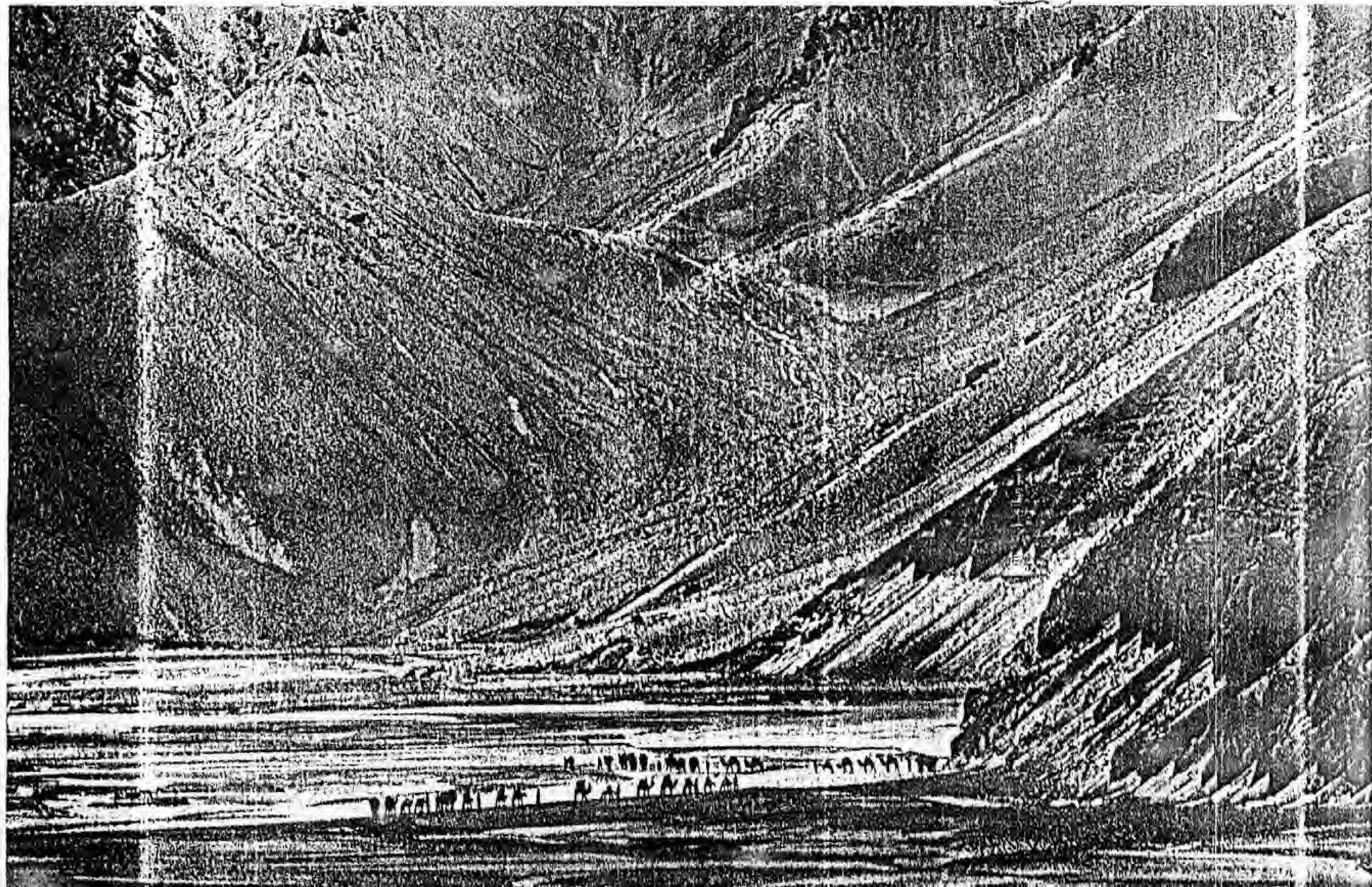
In the atmosphere of an Oriental bazaar, the caravan is loaded with felt rugs and goatskins of sheep fat to be bartered for Wakhi wheat, and we bid the women farewell.

I kiss them affectionately on both cheeks. They return my kisses Kirghiz style, on the lips. Bibi Orun will not let us leave until we have swallowed the last drop from a bowl of warm sweetened milk she has prepared.

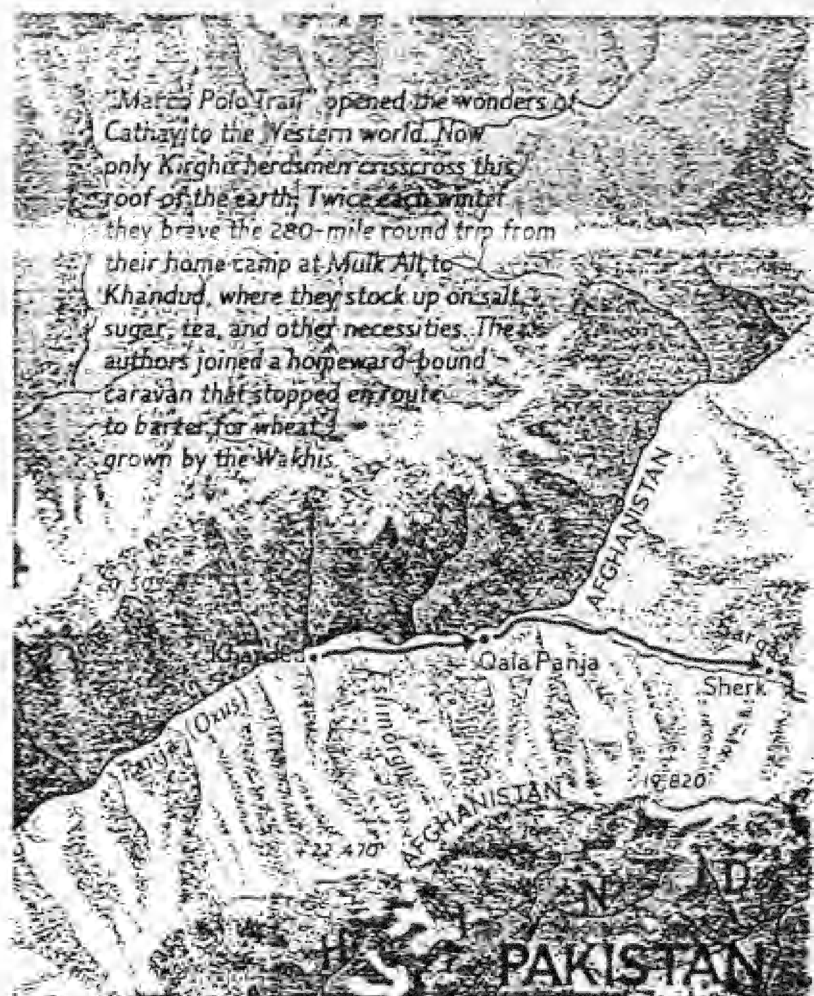
"It is very good against the cold," she tells us. Bibi Orun helps me mount and leads my horse to the edge of camp, and hands me the reins:

"May God be with you," she says.

We are more moved than we want to be. But already the caravan heads out, and we are delivered to the biting wind. □







"Marco Polo Trail" opened the wonders of Cathay to the Western world. Now only Kirghiz herdsmen crisscross this roof of the earth. Twice each winter they brave the 280-mile round trip from their home camp at Mulk Ali to Khandud, where they stock up on salt, sugar, tea, and other necessities. The authors joined a homeward-bound caravan that stopped en route to barter for wheat grown by the Wakhis.

begin to wonder what we are doing here.

We had come this far to join a camel caravan on a rigorous 140-mile winter trek through the Wakhan corridor—the gnarled finger of northeastern Afghanistan that thrusts between the U.S.S.R. and Pakistan to touch China's vast Sinkiang Province (maps, above). By exceptional favor, the Afghan king—His Majesty Mohammed Zahir Shah—had authorized our trip through this remote pocket of his country.

Silk Road Crosses the World's Rooftop

In Kabul, the capital, our friend Rahman Qul had given us permission to ride with his camel train. It would be led by his eldest son, Abdul Wakil, who would meet us at Khandud, the principal town of the Wakhan, where Kirghiz cameleers come westward to trade twice each winter.

Part of our route would follow the old Silk Road once trod by Marco Polo. It would take us along the frozen Wakhan River, into the high country dubbed *Bam-i-Dunya*—"Roof of the World"—to the nation's least accessible region, the Pamirs, where Rahman Qul's people camp with their flocks.*

*Among the few Westerners to visit this remote valley, Jean and Franc Shor traveled the Wakhan corridor two decades ago and became the friends of Kirghiz chieftain Rahman Qul, as told in the November 1950 GEOGRAPHIC. In the September 1968 issue, Thomas J. Abercrombie reported on a journey into the corridor as part of his comprehensive coverage of Afghanistan.

Zasie II, our sturdy mini-jeep, had brought us without incident nearly 500 miles from Kabul across the Hindu Kush—mountains so lofty, the natives say, that even the birds must cross them on foot. To reach Khandud, we had traversed the rugged province of Badakhshan, famed for its horses, lapis lazuli mines, gold panners, and women with skins so fair that "one can see the water trickle down their throats when they drink."

"How will we recognize Abdul Wakil?" Roland had wondered when we drove into Khandud. But the bulky, bandy-legged silhouette waiting on the road ahead could be no one else.

Garbed all in black, wearing high boots and a hat with earflaps that looked oddly like yak horns, he was a formidable figure, utterly unlike the Wakhi peasants we had seen.

He greeted us curtly. His face—it might have been the face of Genghis Khan—was impassive as he read the letter of introduction we had brought from his father.

"Zud borem," he said. "Let us go quickly." The caravan had already departed; he telephoned ahead for it to await us in Qala Panja, the next sizable village.

Abdul Wakil climbed into the car, and we set out at four in the afternoon for Qala Panja, ordinarily only half an hour away. As we bumped along the track, Abdul Wakil smoked constantly and said not a word.

(Continued on page 443)



French husband-wife team, Roland and Sabrina Michaud are among the few Westerners to thread the Wakhan corridor in winter. Caravan leader Abdul Wakil made this picture—the first he ever snapped—with the Michauds' Polaroid camera. The hospitable Kirghiz gave the authors their fur caps.

"Needles piercing the flesh," Sabrina Michaud called the savage snow-laced gales that buffeted the caravan (following pages). Extra-long sleeves protect the cameleers' hands from frostbite on the climb to a 12,000-foot-high pass. The temperature did not rise above 16° F. during the ascent. ▶









At the Eshmorgh River we found the ford concealed beneath a thick crust of ice.

"Where can we cross?" Roland asked.

Abdul Wakil, still silent, alighted from the car and walked out onto the frozen river. He knelt and put his ear to the ice attentively, as a doctor listens to a heartbeat. He advanced with small steps, like a marionette, and listened again.

I followed too carelessly. Thump! I picked myself up and mimicked his mincing step. Behind this bizarre ballet Roland drove slowly, with Zasie's door open, ready to leap out. Here and there the ice groaned, and cracks streaked the surface like lightning.

"Inja khub nist—This spot is not good," warned Abdul Wakil. He could hear the river flowing beneath the crust. Tense and absorbed, we did not notice that night had fallen. Finally we cleared the last stretch. Two hours to travel less than half a mile! Abdul Wakil smiled at us for the first time.

Beyond the ice lay sand—and darkness. And beside the Panja River, still six or seven miles from Qala Panja, Zasie's wheels spun noisily and helplessly in a trap of sand.

Rent a Horse and You Get Its Master

Now Roland and I sit quietly beside the car, watching the sweeping searchlights from the Russian side of the frontier river, waiting for Abdul Wakil to find assistance.

In an hour he returns with only one man and a lantern. Zasie will not be freed tonight.

We remove our sleeping bags and camera gear and stumble off through the sand.

A voice calls out from the blackness. We stop in our tracks. Abdul Wakil pulls out his gun. *"Kist?"* he demands: "Who is it?"

The voice identifies itself; Abdul Wakil pockets his revolver. Two Afghan soldiers emerge from the shadows. The assistant commissioner of Qala Panja, awaiting our arrival, has sent them to search for us.

We trudge on until several buildings loom in the darkness. We enter one of them and, after a cup of tea, fall asleep, exhausted.

In the morning Abdul Wakil recruits a dozen Wakhis. They pull Zasie out of the sand and we proceed to the village. Here we leave the car, sort out our luggage, and negotiate for horses. After lengthy haggling, Abdul Wakil hires six of them for us and our equipment. Each comes with its owner, who will travel on foot; a Wakhi horse is not rented without its master.

These natives of the Wakhan are farmers who grow wheat, barley, and chick-peas. They look almost European, speak a Persian dialect, smoke opium, and sometimes work as guides. Their women, tall and slim and light complexioned, raise the children and tend the animals.

Manhood Judged by Skill in the Saddle

In Qala Panja, Abdul Wakil is furious. He hardly touches the pilaf, the rice-and-meat dish prepared in our honor by the commissioner. The official has allowed the caravan to slip by, despite Abdul Wakil's telephoned request to detain it. Now we will not overtake it for several days.

"If they want to photograph camels I can have as many as they want brought in here," the commissioner grumbles defensively. Abdul Wakil does not even bother to reply.

In the morning we saddle our horses and take up our pursuit of the caravan.

Following the gravelly bank of the Wakhan River, Roland and I tire quickly. Rostam, owner of Roland's horse, cannot understand why we sometimes dismount and walk. In this region a man is judged by his horsemanship. *"Borem, borem!"* Abdul Wakil exclaims impatiently. "Let's go, let's go!"

We stop for the night at Sherk, at an altitude of 9,300 feet, after seven hours of riding. A wealthy landowner welcomes us. His young wife kisses my hand in greeting, and I return the gesture. She smiles, and I know I have done the right thing. Next morning she offers me a cloth-wrapped loaf of bread on a tray for the trip. And I place a packet of tea and a small bottle of perfume on the tray and hand it back to her: it should not be returned empty.

Today we cross the Wakhan River on the bridge at Sargaz. It is so narrow and fragile that we must proceed one at a time. I close my eyes and entrust myself to my horse, but even the animal seems nervous. A bit farther

Born to the mountains and high plains, this Kirghiz herdsman descends from nomads who rode with Genghis Khan. Today he and fellow tribesmen graze herds of goats, yaks, and sheep, which they milk and use for barter.